Imagine that a business school wanted to establish a new campus on the grounds of an urban park—perhaps Central Park in New York City or Hyde Park in London. It would be an undeniable challenge to convince local government, businesses, and residents of the project’s merit—and design a campus that preserved precious public green space for all to enjoy.

On July 31, 2005, Singapore Management University celebrated just such an accomplishment. To mark the occasion, a parade of students, faculty, and staff marched from SMU’s old Bukit Timah campus, its temporary home since 2001, to a new $426 million, 11-acre campus in the heart of Singapore’s Bras Basah city district. Built with the help of government funding, the new campus was the culmination of five years of planning, which began at SMU’s inception as a university in 2000. The campus comprises six buildings, including SMU’s Lee Kong Chian School of Business, School of Accountancy, School of Economics and Social Sciences, School of Information Systems, Li Ka Shing Library, and administrative offices.

SMU’s new site was built on the grounds of the city’s Bras Basah Park, a landmark now reflected in the design of the new campus. “The school wanted to return the public space to public use,” says SMU president Howard Hunter. As a result, many of the buildings are built off the ground, with free-flowing walkways, courtyards, and green spaces underneath that are open to the public. Large Angsana trees, hallmarks of Bras Basah Park, were dug up and kept in a nursery for four years while construction was completed. The trees were then replanted so that the old-growth vegetation of the original landscape was not lost.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Singapore’s urban center was home to several educational institutions, but all had left the city for suburban campuses, Hunter explains. SMU and the Singaporean government were eager to bring education back to the city’s cultural and urban life. The goal was to create an educational center similar to those in New York City, London, and Paris, while continuing to be an open and accessible public destination.

“Many universities have activities going on in their urban centers, but they are in spaces that are forbidding and uninviting,” says Hunter. “To be a part of the city, the space must be accessible and open, in feeling as well as fact.”

The school’s new identity as both an academic center and city hub is definitely by design, says Hunter. Students are now minutes away from internships, by subway or on foot. The campus includes retail shops and cafes at ground level; in addition, the school hosts performances, exhibitions, lecture series, and seminars that attract large public attendance.

That school-city interaction is as much a part of SMU’s mission and identity as its classrooms, research centers, and computer labs, says Hunter. Students are more aware of how their education meshes with the business and public activities occurring around them; at the same time, the public is reminded that a tax-supported institution like SMU belongs to them. “SMU belongs to all of Singapore,” he says. “It’s a way of integrating academics and research with the realities and functioning of the real world.”